DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 332 CG 015 505

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TITLE Altering a Parent's Perception of Child Behavior by Environmental Factors.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (53rd, Detroit, MI, April 30-May 2, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Problems; *Child Rearing; *Family Environment; *Family Influence; *Parent Child Relationship; Parents; Perception; Social Cognition; Social Environment; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

The perceptual process involved in parental guidance and discipline of children may be sensitive to distortion by aversive environmental conditions. Married couples (N=24) completed a written interview to examine the relationship between exposure to disruptive life-events and a parent's ability to discern different types of child misbehaviors. Results revealed that fathers demonstrated a weaker discrimination of child misbehaviors and were more affected by stress. The findings suggest that problems in parent-child interaction may be due to the probability that a distortion in the perception of child misbehaviors often leads to response discrepancies. A parent may respond the same way to more serious misbehaviors as to less serious ones and vice-versa. The mother and father must also reconcile perceptual differences before they can be consistent in response to the child. Additionally, the findings support a shift from emphasizing psychopathological models in understanding family problems to a more general approach including environmental, situational, economic, historical, and personality factors. (Author/JAC)

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ED208332

ALTERING A PARENT'S PERCEPTION OF CHILD BEHAVIOR[1] BY ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

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CG 015505

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It has been argued that family interaction is best understood when the investigator shifts the focus of study to include factors that impinge on the family from the social setting (Gelles, 1973). If the social setting can be viewed in terms of environmental events that interplay with the interaction of family members, then it is possible to assume that aversive events would have detrimental effects on family functions. One such function, which is the general focus of this research, is the parent's guidance and discipline of their children. Specifically, this study examines the perceptual process and the distortive nature of aversive environmental conditions.

The debilitative effects of exposure to prolonged life stress have been documented in numerous studies (e.g., Petrich and Holmes, 1976). The major hypothesis of these studies is that there is a strong relationship between the magnitude and number of stressful events occurring in an individual's social environment and the degree of both physical and mental well-being (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Myers, Lindenthal, & Pepper, 1971; Wyler, Masuda, & Holmes, 1971; Rabkin & Struening, 1976). A systematic program of research on the consequences of stressful life events was initiated by Holmes and Rahe (1967), who developed a standardized paper and pencil inventory of life experiences; the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, later called the Schedule of Recent Experience (SRE). The value of this instrument for use in the family context is determined by the wide range of personal, family, and occupational situations that are weighted according to their relative

impact on an individual's regular routine.

Justice and Duncan (1976) have found that prolonged life stress as measured by the SRE may be a precursor to child abuse. A group of parents were compared to a group of parents who had experienced difficulties with their children but had not physically abused them. Of the many variables used to distinguish between the groups, the exposure to prolonged life stress was most notable. During the previous 12 months the parents who had the more serious problems with their children had also experienced significantly more stressful events. A particular difficulty with the study is that it is correlational in nature and does not answer any questions as to how the stressful events are linked to physical abuse of a child. However, it is implicit in the hypotheses of the study that as the magnitude and number of stressful events increase, the problems between the parent and child may shift into more serious states.

The present study was designed to determine whether the culmination of stressful life events affects parent-child interaction not involving physical injury. The parental perception of child misbehaviors, e.g, what are the consequences of certain behaviors and which are more serious, is thought to be an integral part of the discipline process and helps the parent determine how to respond to their child. A distortion of this perceptual distinction would have implications for the parents' response. The authors hypothesized that exposure to extremely high levels of prolonged life stress would impair the ability of either parent to discern differences in misbehavior patterns of children.

Method

Subjects

Sixty married couples ($\bar{X}$ age = 34.6) participated in a research program designed to assess problems in family interaction that are related to stress. As part of pre-program assessment, each parent completed a Schedule of Recent Experience (SRE). Twelve couples were selected if the number of Life Change Units (LCU) of both parents fell in the upper quartile ($\bar{X}$ = 355.83); and twelve from the lower quartile ($\bar{X}$ = 65.00). All couples had at least one child.

Procedure

After five weeks each of the 48 parents participated in an interview which was part of the ongoing research project. As part of the interview, the parents completed a questionnaire containing written descriptions of 24 child misbehaviors in age groups of 1,3,5, and 7 years. One third of the descriptions constituted harmful actions to the child or to other children, one third were spontaneous actions which typified behaviors of curiosity, and the other third were annoying or rebellious actions directed either at a parent or another child. The different types of misbehaviors were distributed randomly within each age catagory. Respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of each misbehavior on a nine-point scale (0 = not at all serious; 8 = extremely serious).

Previous validation of the scale (McCuan & Lloyd, 1979) demonstrated that a difference score between the total responses for Harmful and Spontaneous (H - S) misbehaviors and between Rebellious and Spontaneous (R - S) misbehaviors

yields an index of the respondents' ability to distinguish between the misbehaviors. For example, harmful misbehaviors were rated extremely serious because of the consequences for the child as compared to spontaneous misbehaviors. However, for older age groups (e.g., 5 and 7 years), the rebellious or annoying misbehaviors were rated more serious while ratings of spontaneous misbehaviors remained low across age groups. A higher overall score (H - S + R - S) means a larger discrimination between the types of misbehavior.

Results

The mean of combined difference scores (H - S + R - S / n) for fathers and mothers according to SRE group are reported in Table 1. A 2 X 2 (Sex of Parent by SRE Group) analysis of variance revealed a main effect for sex of parent, F (1,44) = 19.25, $p < .01$, where mothers demonstrated a stronger discrimination of child misbehaviors that fathers. An interaction of scores suggested that high prolonged life stress impaired the discrimination of fathers, F (1,44) = 3.08, $p < .09$.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Discussion

A relationship has been found between stressful life events and family problems including child abuse. However, the process by which a change in routine life patterns is linked to aggression toward children has not been

made clear. Many studies have approached this question via the mental or physical attributes of the abusing parent suggesting that since abusers exhibit mild to severe forms of depression and other types of mental instability (Steele & Pollack, 1968), that it is a sick or abnormal person who is aggressive toward their child. This approach is narrow in scope and neglects the findings of other research which emphasizes environmental factors.

The current study has focused on an aspect of parent-child interaction which may be highly sensitive to changes in the environment, that is, the perceptual distinction the parent makes in the behavior patterns of their children. The results of the study indicate that a discrimination between different types of misbehavior, particularly for fathers, is weakened by an increase in distracting aversive stimuli in the social context. How this may lead to problems in parent-child relationships is due to the probability that parents may develop inconsistencies in response toward their child. In other words, the parent may respond the same way to a relatively minor incident as to a more serious misbehavior or vice-versa.

Another aspect of the current results is that perceptions of mothers and fathers are affected differently by aversive events. Each parent will have misperceptions of the child's behavior but also must reconcile these perceptions with the way things are seen by the spouse before the two can be consistent in response to the child.

Examining the social setting of parents, it may be argued that the causes of family problems may be linked to aversive events which impinge upon the family from the environment. The uniqueness of this approach is its shift in emphasis from a specific focus on the personality of abusing parents to a more

general model including environmental, situational, economic and historical as well as personality factors in the etiology of child abuse.

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Table 1

Mean of Combined Difference Scores (H - S + R - S / n)

for Fathers and Mothers According to SRE Group

	SRE	
	Low	High
Mothers	21.25	19.91
Fathers	19.16	14.58

Footnote

[1]This research was supported by a grant to Dr. Paul J. Lloyd from the Research Grants and Funding Committee of Southeast Missouri State University. The paper was presented in the Psi Chi (The National Honor Society in Psychology) program at the meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Detroit, Michigan, May 1, 1981.